Refugeehood (De)materialised: An Analysis of Agency in Select Refugee Narratives

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Introduction

Literature serves as a powerful medium for capturing the complexities of human life across different time periods and cultures. Over the years, it has evolved to reflect not only the lives of individuals but also the hidden struggles and silenced experiences of marginalized groups. Among these, refugee narratives have emerged as a significant form of expression, shedding light on the lives of displaced individuals who grapple with identity loss, oppression, and survival. These narratives, authored by refugees themselves or by writers with deep engagement and research, offer an authentic representation of the challenges faced by millions. "A frequent characteristic in contemporary accounts of refugee migration is taking recourse to predecessor texts and gesturing towards shared ground between divergent fugitive itineraries across time and space" (Rupp 36). They explore critical issues such as the causes of displacement, the harrowing conditions of exile, and the psychological trauma of statelessness. Moreover, these works advocate for solutions, urging those in power and society at large to take meaningful steps toward improving the lives of refugees.

Refugees are individuals stripped of statehood, rights, and identity, often forced to flee their homes due to persecution, conflict, or systemic injustice. For them, the concept of 'home,' a place of safety and belonging, is replaced by displacement and insecurity. The reasons for their forced migration often stem from human rights violations, ethnic hatred, and abuses of power.

Refugees endure severe violence and, upon seeking asylum in foreign lands, face further marginalization and limited acceptance. Their lives are a constant struggle between survival amidst deprivation and the pursuit of recognition in unfamiliar territories. “Thus, what is essential for refugees status, distinguishing refugees from all other similarly deprived persons, is either the willingness of the home state to allow them access to international assistance or its inability to prevent such aid from being administered” (Shacknove 283).

Refugee Narratives

Refugee narratives give voice to displaced communities, highlighting their struggles with forced displacement, lack of identity, and minimal representation. Jacobsen observes, “Millions of forcibly displaced people living in and outside camps seek to support themselves and their families often with minimal humanitarian assistance, and in the face of active resistance by governments and citizens of host countries” (99). These accounts, drawn from real-life experiences and fictional works, address social and human rights issues. Writing such narratives demands courage and a commitment to social justice, as authors expose the inequalities faced by refugees and challenge oppressive systems. This literature reflects the despair of crises, the resilience of survival, and the fragile hope of rebuilding. Themes of hatred, inequality, conflict, and resistance recur, often revealing the deep trauma caused by acts of dehumanization. Refugee narratives trace their displacement and survival in foreign lands, encouraging readers to empathize with their plight. These works underscore the urgent need for peace, equality, and mutual respect to counter the cycles of oppression and violence.

Select Sources and Authors

The works selected for closer study after a brief survey of various refugee narratives are *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, a novel by Atia Abawi, *The Boat People* a novel by Sharon Bala, *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks,* a memoir by Habiburahman written with Sophie Ansel, *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West* by Zoya Phan written with Damien Lewis, *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest refugee Camp,* a non-fiction by Ben Rawlence, *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child,* a memoir by Sandra Uwiringiyimana written with Abigail Pesta, and *The Milk of Birds*, a novel by Sylvia Whitman. These books, which include memoirs, biographies, and fiction, offer distinct perspectives on the refugee experience from different regions around the world. They highlight the challenges faced by Syrians, Sudanese, Congolese, Sri Lankans, Rohingya, and Karen refugees, exploring both the unique and shared aspects of displacement, survival, and identity. These narratives not only document personal pain and trauma but also stand as acts of resistance, giving voice to the oppressed. Through the stories of individuals, these works reflect the collective experiences of millions of refugees, offering a powerful way to challenge the systems that perpetuate their suffering.

Habiburahman, also known as Habib, is a Rohingya born in 1979 in Burma, now Myanmar. He fled his country to escape torture, persecution, and detention, initially seeking refuge in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, where he faced further discrimination and violence. Sophie Ansel, co-author of Habiburahman's memoir *First They Erased Our Name*, is a French journalist, author, and filmmaker who lived in South Asia for several years. Sandra Uwiringiyimana is a Women's Rights Activist, Refugee Advocate, and Author. She co-founded and serves as the director of partnerships and communications at the Jimbere Fund, an

organization working to rebuild communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Abigail Pesta, the co-author is an award-winning journalist who has reported from cities across the globe, including New York, London, and Hong Kong.

Writer-educator Sylvia Whitman has authored numerous articles and several children's history books, including a notable picture book titled *Under the Ramadan Moon*. Zoya Phan, born on October 27, 1980, is a Burmese political activist of Karen descent, currently residing in the United Kingdom. Atia Abawi is a foreign correspondent and author renowned for her coverage of global conflicts and her advocacy for female empowerment through her writing and reporting. Ben Rawlence is a British writer and former researcher for Human Rights Watch in the Horn of Africa. Sharon Bala, born on April 3, 1979, in Dubai to Sri Lankan parents, moved to Canada as a child. Now a Canadian writer, she resides in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thesis Statement

Amid the escalating global refugee crises, refugeehood remains a profound challenge, stripping individuals of their political, social, cultural, economic, legal, and bodily agency. This study critically examines the erosion of these forms of agency and explores refugees' resilience, not through the assertion of autonomy, but through their ongoing struggle for survival in the face of systemic and enduring adversity.

Objectives

1. To explore the concept of refugeehood, its historical and contemporary significance, and the characteristics of refugee narratives, including a brief survey of contemporary refugee narratives.

2. To examine the loss of political, social, cultural, economic, and legal agency experienced by refugees, applying Arendt's concept of statelessness and the right to have rights.
3. To analyse the loss of bodily agency among refugees, using Arendt's idea of the banality of evil to understand the corporal impact of displacement.
4. To investigate the resilience of refugee agency through survival, applying Arendt's concept of plurality to explore how refugees persist and navigate adversity within diverse social contexts.

Research Parameters for the Study

This study will engage with a diverse array of refugee narratives, drawing on both contemporary memoirs and fictional accounts to offer a nuanced exploration of the refugee experience. The geographical focus of the research spans across several regions impacted by displacement, including Syria, Horn of Africa especially Sudan, Congo, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Rohingya), and the Karen region. These locations were selected to provide a broad and representative overview of forced migration, encompassing a variety of causes such as conflict, political persecution, ethnic violence, and civil war. The works chosen for analysis are those that offer intimate, first-person insights, as well as creative representations of displacement, providing a balanced mix of lived experiences and symbolic narratives.

Methodology

Methodologically, the research will employ a qualitative approach, with an emphasis on close textual analysis of the selected narratives. This analysis will seek to uncover how themes of agency and resilience are represented in the texts, paying particular attention to how the loss of political, social, cultural, and bodily agency is portrayed. Additionally, the research will explore

how resilience is depicted as a form of agency, particularly in the face of dehumanization and statelessness. A thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring motifs, characters, and symbolic structures that reflect the lived realities of refugees, while also drawing upon secondary literature to contextualize the findings. All sources will be documented according to the MLA Handbook (9th Edition), ensuring proper citation and adherence to scholarly standards.

Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the selection of a limited number of texts that may not fully capture the diversity of refugee experiences across the globe. Moreover, since the primary texts include translations, there may be inherent challenges in fully preserving the nuance of the original narratives. However, these works were chosen not only for their relevance but also for their compelling depictions of the refugee experience, offering rich insights into the resilience and survival of displaced individuals.

In terms of expected outcomes, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation within refugee studies and literary scholarship by offering an in-depth exploration of how agency is lost, experienced, and reclaimed in the refugee condition. By focusing on the intersections of narrative, memory, and identity, the study seeks to bring forward a more complex understanding of resilience as a form of agency in the face of displacement and systemic violence. Furthermore, it aims to provide new interpretations of Arendt's theories, situating them within the contemporary refugee crisis and expanding the theoretical framework for understanding displacement in the modern world.

Structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, with three core chapters dedicated to the main research content. The first chapter introduces the contemporary issue of refugees, placing it within a global context to highlight the urgency and complexity of the refugee crisis. It explores the genre of refugee writing, discussing well-known authors and works, and identifies the common features and themes that emerge in these narratives. This chapter provides a detailed introduction to the authors and their texts chosen for the study. Following the introduction, a comprehensive review of the literature is presented, which leads to the identification of the research gap. The chapter then presents the thesis statement, clearly outlining the central argument of the study. The research objectives and parameters are articulated, followed by a brief overview of the structure of the entire thesis, which serves as a roadmap for the reader.

Chapter 2, titled Human Debris of Statelessness, explores the concept of statelessness through the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory of the "right to have rights." Arendt's exploration of the implications of statelessness, particularly the absence of legal protection and recognition, provides the theoretical framework for this chapter. This concept is used to examine the selected primary texts, showing how refugees—or those on the verge of becoming refugees—experience a profound loss of political, social, cultural, religious, economic, and legal agency. The chapter demonstrates how the characters in these texts embody the condition of statelessness, often depicted as "human debris," a term used to describe individuals who are marginalized and excluded from society. Through this analysis, the chapter highlights how these texts illustrate the dehumanizing effects of statelessness and the struggle for basic rights and recognition.

Chapter 3, titled Bo(dies) of No Return, focuses on the loss of bodily agency in the context of refugee experiences. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," the chapter explores how violence against the refugee body is normalized, not only by ordinary individuals but also by state actors, military personnel, and various other authorities. Arendt's theory, which explains how systemic evil can be perpetuated through the erosion of moral responsibility, is applied to examine how state and military violence against refugees becomes an accepted part of the status quo. The chapter delves into various forms of corporeal abuse, including sexual violence, forced labour, trafficking, physical beatings, and other forms of bodily harm. Through this analysis, the chapter demonstrates how the refugee body is subjected to dehumanization and exploitation, rendering it a site of continuous suffering and loss of agency.

Chapter 4, titled (Re)silience and Agency, analyses the resilience of refugees as an ongoing and recurring process essential for their survival. This chapter focuses on how refugees, despite their marginalization, rely on resilience as a vital means of coping with displacement. Arendt's concept of plurality is applied to show that solidarity among refugees plays a crucial role in their ability to persist. In these collective acts of solidarity, refugees demonstrate their resilience, allowing them to endure in the face of dehumanization and statelessness. The chapter examines how this resilience is portrayed in the selected primary texts, illustrating how refugees, through solidarity and mutual support, navigate their hardships. Resilience becomes the only way to survive, emphasizing that it is not a form of resistance but a necessary survival strategy.

Chapter 5, titled Conclusion, contextualizes the study and synthesizes the findings, illustrating how the preceding chapters are interconnected through the central theme of agency. It emphasizes the key observations drawn from the analysis of the selected texts, underlining that resilience and agency are integral to the refugee experience. The chapter further examines how

the theoretical frameworks discussed in earlier chapters—specifically Arendt's concepts of statelessness, the banality of evil, plurality, and resilience—converge to offer a comprehensive understanding of refugee agency. The conclusion presents the significant findings and observations of the study, summarizing how it contributes to the broader discourse on the subject. Additionally, it identifies potential areas for further research, highlighting how future studies could build on the themes of resilience, agency, and statelessness, particularly in relation to other marginalized communities.

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Publications

S. No	Article	Journal	Other Details Vol/No/Page No/ Year	Published in UGC- CARE / Scopus Indexed/ Web of Science
1.	Language of the Oppressed: Boon of Nature and Curse of Humans in the Life of a Refugee.	*Language Discourse and Society*	Vol 9, no 2, December 2021, pp. 81-88.	Scopus Indexed
2.	Unlatching the Caged Truth: A Refugee Woman's Narration of Genocide as an Act of Rebellion	*Inclusive*	Vol 2, No. 25, July – August 2024, pp. 559 – 567.	UGC – CARE